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Introduction

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Introduction

Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès and Gérald Préher

1 In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida situates the haunting of the specter in the present as much as in the past, since haunting is a form of repetition which always precedes its origin: "this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations" (xviii). Haunting as a specific mode of appearance and manifestation of being is a presence-absence, an absence made present through its traces or its remains which the ghost embodies in more or less frightening forms. No wonder short stories often represent scenes of haunting: their necessity to conjure up reality by means of a few words only makes them particularly apt to represent the evanescent and short-lived presence-absence that is haunting. Clearly, as John Wain has it, "[t]he best short stories are completely unforgettable" (51); because they are short, they have a lasting impact on readers. The specific condensed temporal mode of the short story, which is owed to the brief format of the genre, also befits the characteristic mode of manifestation of the ghost which fleetingly comes back to haunt texts, memories and places, thus allowing the past to briefly resurface in the present. For haunting is both a repetition and a multiplicity, a singular and remarkable event that is also a recognition, a feeling of *déjà-vu* (Derrida 10) which tampers with the chronological linearity of time. In a haunted story, time is distorted, because the temporality of haunting is specific: it connects past, present and future as past events or dead characters are depicted as resurfacing in the present and as questioning the course of time towards the future. Owing to its short temporal frame and formal economy, the short story is particularly apt to stage the intrusion of the past into the present that opens up to the possibility of a future. The emergence of revenants in a story is always untimely, shocking, out of place. It signals the haunting presence of the past in the present which interrupts the habitual chronological flow of time. By bringing the course of chronological history to an end, it stages the demise of history itself. It operates what Derrida calls "a hauntology" (Derrida 10) which disjoints time and questions the possibility and unicity of being itself. Thus, "hauntology" works against ontology, as Derrida underlines, by blurring fixed categories the way we know them, starting with those of time, space and history. Ghosts defy our capacities for

knowledge by challenging our senses. They beggar reason and wisdom, and lead us to question our own perceptions starting with the testimony of our own eyes.

2 Indeed, ghosts are seen as much as they are felt, since it is through their embodiment that they are perceived as a presence-absence. The tension that builds when looking at a haunting specter stems from the challenge it poses to the rational mind. In haunted short stories, the eyes see (the body perceives) what the brain cannot believe in reason, putting mind and body at odds for the greatest discomfort of the character who sees ghosts, and for the reader's own discomfort as well. However, ghosts do not make themselves manifest to all and sundry and haunting may go unnoticed if its tell-tale signs are ignored. This is because the ghosts that haunt short fiction are not always forms of return of well-known themes and genres. Ghosts can be stereotypical in their appearances as they disclose themselves to us, when they bear tell-tale signs that can easily be decoded. The waft of a draught when there is no wind, a white sheet floating in the air, the clinking of chains, are hackneyed themes signaling a haunting presence. And yet haunting can also occur in the absence of those signs, which no doubt redoubles its uncanny nature. When haunting precedes the appearance of the haunting ghost itself, when it takes place in the absence of any ghost, it becomes sheer repetition without a presence, the repetition of an absence that becomes presence through its repeated occurrence. The affinity between haunting and repetition is to be traced to the temporal specificity of haunting as an iteration of things past. Haunting is indeed a form of return to the past, or rather, a return of the past in the present that orients the present towards future repetitions. It is always untimely, ill-timed and disruptive. It irrupts, disrupts and interrupts the smooth course of reality, leaving the subject who is confronted with the appearance of the ghost devastated.

3 There is therefore a traumatic dimension to haunting that mimics the source of haunting itself, which is often traumatic owing to its affinities with pain, disaster and death, since it is of the essence of the traumatic event to return again and again until it can be accounted for by the subject. Indeed, the traumatic event, because it could not be assimilated at the time of its occurrence, keeps coming back to haunt psyches and narratives alike. The subject's very impossibility to process the shocking and horrifying nature of the traumatic event transforms it into a haunting phenomenon. The traumatic event then irrupts in the present until it can actually be reinserted by the subject himself/herself into a sequential narrative that makes sense of it. Thus, only such a narrative can interrupt the cycle of repetitions and the very possibility of spelling out this narrative often signals the end of the haunting process, enabling the subject to overcome the traumatic event (Freud). Interestingly enough, the source of trauma may be personal and individual but it can also be rooted in a collective form of experience such as a revolution or a radical transformation of society. Social and political upheavals may thus generate trauma that societies at large and individuals in them suffer from. A case in point is the social and political context of the revival of the medieval gothic in England which, in its literary version, is teeming with ghosts and haunted places. Gothic short fiction in particular constitutes a perfect haunting ground for all kinds of ghouls and ghosts in its capacity to stage the return of personal, collective and historical forms of the repressed. In them, haunting creates an uncanny effect which is the hallmark of the very genre. Gothic short fiction is thus peopled with specters that shake their chains, blow their evil breath in the neck of innocent heroines and take on the stereotypical form of the revenant whose return aims to frighten

characters and readers alike. The very parodic and ironic modes of those appearances sometimes allow for a more comic turn to haunting. When the return of the past takes on the grotesque appearance of a ghost that will not go away, haunting can be frightening as well as a good springboard for laughter. For haunting can be comical as well as fearsome—repetition being in itself a potent comic device. The return of the ghost can therefore contribute to adding a lighter note to a short story.

4 On a thematic level, haunting has always been a feature of the short story, a source of either comedy or fright. On a metafictional level, it is even more common since the return of an obsession or an image often lies at the roots of the writing of short stories. Since its inception in 1983, the *Journal of the Short Story in English* has featured numerous interviews with writers reflecting on the art of short story writing, and many of them have mentioned the impact of a particular image that had been haunting them, triggering their imagination into writing. In the interview included in *JSSE* 67, Ron Rash observes: "My stories start with an image and that image could end up anywhere" (304). The event around which a story revolves does not, according to him, have to be used to introduce the story. Instead, the narrative voice should lead the reader to that central event, which the story originates from, so that what comes before and after its revelation can be fully understood. Rash thus echoes what Elizabeth Spencer explained about her own stories in *JSSE* 18, that "[t]here's usually a central incident in my stories" (14). This incident provides the unity of effect famously defined by Edgar Allan Poe whose short fiction often relies on haunting. Is not the black cat in the eponymous story the haunting figure in the tale? Is not the oval portrait, the object that haunts the narrator of the story so much that its tale must be told? Poe, of course, chooses the titles of his stories so that the image they conjure up may haunt the readers and make them as haunted as his narrators and characters—"The Mask of the Red Death" could be told by the only survivor in the story, the mask itself, thus making the tale haunted on numerous levels; "The Tell-Tale Heart," tells its own story, and leads to the final resolution/revelation by driving the narrator into madness and fear; "The Fall of the House of Usher," keeps the house standing despite its collapse...

5 Unsurprisingly, short fiction is more apt to create haunting images in the reader's imagination. In a preface to her ghost stories, Edith Wharton claims that "Ghosts to make themselves manifest, require two conditions abhorrent to the modern mind: silence and continuity" (9). The silent hours are, according to Wharton, the perfect time for ghosts to appear but she also notes that "the ghost should never be allowed to forget that his only chance of survival is in the tales of those who have encountered him" (10). Telling about ghosts thus keeps them alive and makes it possible for them to perform their haunting: they find souls who are receptive to their message and able to share them. A good example of such ideas can be found in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*—the writer felt that the form had "the small strength [...] of perfect homogeneity" (123)—but William Goyen, a 20th century writer from Texas, could also serve to illustrate them. Goyen is indeed particularly interested in depicting characters who are haunted by their past and he frequently explores it to "give a luminous meaning to their lives" (Oates 4). In one of his novels, *In a Farther Country* (1955), he even has one of his characters, Marietta, echo Wharton's observation when she says that "Things must be told to another or they die" (39). Joyce Carol Oates, reviewing Goyen's 1975 *Collected Stories*, notes that the volume is "an excellent introduction to the haunting, intensely poetic fictional world of William Goyen" (4).

6 Out of the twenty-six stories featured in Goyen's volume, "A Shape of Light" is the best illustration of Oates's statement for, in its very texture, the whole tale is haunted: "The words he wrote down on paper, shaped in long thin skeletal characters, with a bony forefinger maneuvering his pencil, even as though the characters themselves were ghosts of the alphabet, are ghosts of a page—the page is haunted" (100). Boney Benson, the mysterious writer whose name resonates with this quotation, becomes alive once the characters have been assembled into words, once they have filled the page, as is the case in many short stories: "But on this haunted page he comes back to us, his face and his look and all about him; he comes back like an old sad age yellow on the page; bring a light to it: see how the words flare up to light, answering to what put them there. The page is lighted" (100). Life emanates from the paper which has now been found and the message it carries will be brought to light thanks to the narrator. Goyen's narrators are haunted by the past and telling about it makes it possible for them to externalize its mysteries, its darkness, and eventually bring it to signify and help life become meaningful. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle puts it, "haunting is a subjective experience, it is subjectifying: it transforms the one experiencing it into a subject. [...] A haunting is marked by affect" (7, our translation). Following this idea, it is clear that Goyen's narrators, as Poe's and many others, are not only affected by the story they are shaping; they are infected by it and the act of telling helps them give shape to words that need light to shine and resonate through the readers.

7 Elizabeth Bowen has shown the importance of making the reader figure out "exactly what happened next (or in some cases what *had* happened)" (qtd. in Shaw 260), and this is particularly noticeable in "The Demon Lover," in which, despite his death, a lover means to keep the flame burning: "'I shall be with you [...] sooner or later. You won't forget that. You need do nothing but wait'" (663). The reader, just like the loved one in Bowen's story, is left to expect the return of the dead that is somehow both longed for and feared. In his essay "The Uncanny," Freud explains that the sense of the uncanny "is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror [...] so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general" (219). For Freud, "the uncanny" originates with "what is familiar and agreeable, and [...] what is concealed and kept out of sight" (224), what is present despite being absent. Short forms rely on ellipsis making this absent presence noticeable in the interstices—the blanks in the text. They certainly create what Freud refers to as the "uncanny effect [that] is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary [i.e., purely hypothetical or speculative] appears before us in reality, or *when a symbol takes over the full function of the thing it symbolizes*" (244).

8 The essays collected in this issue have been organized chronologically and tackle various forms of haunting from the Victorian period to nowadays. Anne Besnault-Levita focuses on the renewed interest in the Gothic that dates back to the 1960s. Her contribution revolves around Victorian and modernist texts that make use of the gothic or uncanny trope of the woman in the looking glass. By reading together heroine-centred narratives by female writers published before and after the 1880s, Besnault-Levita exposes a continuum of preoccupations and anxieties that have to do with history, with the specificities of the short story as genre, and with the literary construction of the female self. Analyzing a more masculine world, that of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Sarah Whitehead considers how the Irish writer continues the well-

established tradition of the comic gothic initiated by Horace Walpole. She shows that Le Fanu's use of humor, his call for readerly involvement and critical detachment, creates polyphonic, ambiguous texts in which the absence of a single authoritative narrative voice adds to the haunting nature of the tales themselves. Leslie de Bont's focus is on May Sinclair's psychoanalytical rewriting of Kipling's "They" (1904) in her story "The Intercessor" (1911). She explains that this particular text illustrates Sinclair's interests in feminine psychoanalysis and that it represents a character's haunting as the peculiar reenactment of the mother-daughter failed link. Through a displacement of the supernatural onto a child's longing for her mother, haunting, de Bont contends, becomes a tool for a psychological exploration that incorporates the specificities of feminine psychoanalysis into a Gothic aesthetics. Adèle Cassigneul, then presents a detailed reading of Virginia Woolf's "A Haunted House" which, according to Cassigneul, endorses and transgresses the rule of its genre, the ghost story, to become a playful and reflexive modernist text, a haunted intermediary space. She suggests that the short story is haunted by texts and images that make it a site of both inheritance and creative subversion. Illustrating a related point, Thomas Legendre shows that as a "ghost story" which turns out to be not so much of a ghost story, Edith Wharton's "Miss Mary Pask" invites reading from a confluence of feminist, psychoanalytic, and biographical perspectives. The story's title, along with its setting in Brittany, presents a character who inhabits a liminal space between life and death where differences are blended and intermixed. Wharton's story somehow negotiates a ghostly threshold between the articulation and repression of female desire as life and death itself.

9 The next three contributions do not focus on gender in relation to haunting. Suzanne Bray discusses Charles Williams' only short story, "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*" (1935) which she reads as postscript to Williams' spiritual thriller. She also sees the story as a theological tale in which fear comes from the possibility of eternal damnation, the haunting from the reality of unresolved hatred and the horror from the realization that the kingdom of hell may be within us or very close by. Tackling Arthur Machen's short stories, Deborah Bridle echoes Derrida's aforementioned comments and understands haunting as the manifestation of a repetition. She demonstrates how diegetic as well as extratextual repetitions can be seen as haunting processes for the characters as well as the readers. For Bridle, Machen's stories can be considered as haunting and haunted bodies because the text ends up becoming the ghost it endeavored to conjure up. Ineke Bockting focuses on textual aspects as well in her analysis of "A Wedding in Brownsville" by Isaac Bashevis Singer, which she reads through the prism of narratological tools. Pascale Tollance, for her part, provides a close reading of a particular text, A.S. Byatt's "The Changeling." Quoting from an interview that came out after the publication of *The Children's Book*, in which Byatt explains that "There is one steady theme of my writing that I don't understand [...] I don't understand why in my work writing is so dangerous," Tollance goes on to read "The Changeling" as an illustration of Byatt's words. For her, the haunting idea that writing relates to murder is at the heart of the text in which the author revisits the ghost story. Haunting, Tollance endeavors to show by using Derrida's theories, questions the place which is given or denied to the body in the space of the text, and the forms in which it might return.

10 Liliane Louvel and Stanley van der Ziel then take us in John McGahern country. Louvel's presentation deals with "The White Breath" and the return of memory while van der Ziel focuses on the intertext with James Joyce's stories and novels. Both essays suggest

that haunting can be related to a journey—a journey inward (Louvel) or a journey westward (van der Ziel). It appears that there is always a subtext in McGahern's work that initiates the character's search for meaning. The last two essays discuss American writers: Tanya Tromble analyses two stories by Joyce Carol Oates while Amélie Moisy ponders on haunting and satire in short fiction by George Saunders. Tromble starts out with quotations from an Oates essay on the short story, making it clear that early in her career, Oates already had an understanding of short fiction that she maintained ever since. Tromble discusses how certain contemporary theories of psychoanalysis and psychology such as spectrality and borderline affective disorders can shed light on Oates' use of haunting. Moisy considers Saunders' ghost stories in the light of Derrida's "hauntology" and the spectral turn, wondering what effect they have as satire. She makes the point that satire, like the specter, is liminal. She thus evokes Derrida's view of the specter as a force for change in relation to Saunders's social ghosts and his varied and allusive satire. Saunders' specters, Moisy contends, show that *hubris* must be reined in by *sophrosyne*, and that its virtues are needed for change to bring just action.

11 The thirteen contributions included in this issue demonstrate that haunting can refer to a particular mental state, to the presence-absence of characters that have been marginalized and have eventually taken center stage; it may refer to literary ghosts who lurk in from behind and invite intertextual readings, or to the mad women in the attic whose voices can still be heard...

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